

Enhancing Self-Esteem and Social Competence in Late Adolescents with Insecure Attachment: A Study on Forgiveness Education

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Abstract

The present study attempted to improve self-esteem and social competence through a self-administered forgiveness program based on the Enright Forgiveness Process Model. The participants were individuals with insecure attachment, who had been hurt and unfairly treated by their mothers. The forgiveness education program continued for eight weeks. Self-esteem and social competence are known as psychological features related to insecure attachment. To compare the gains between the forgiveness group and the control group, a paired samples t-test was conducted. The results showed that the forgiveness groups' gain scores for secure attachment, forgiveness, self-esteem, and social competence were significantly greater than the control group's. The enhanced scores on all variables but social competence lasted until the follow-up test, which was conducted eight weeks after the posttest.

Key words: attachment, forgiveness, late adolescence, self-esteem, social competence

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Late adolescence is the time when young people separate themselves from their parents' nest where they have been protected, and begin their new lives in a college or a work place unfamiliar to them. They meet new friends, navigate through previously unknown environments, and encounter new circumstances. In other words, late adolescents have a developmental task to adjust to a new psychological and social environment. In the course of this adjustment, some adolescents may have difficulty in interpersonal relationships and self-esteem, which may lead to psychological problems such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, and so forth. One of the most influential approaches to explain individual differences in psycho-social adjustment is the attachment theory. A number of studies confirmed the relationship between insecure attachment and self-esteem (Parker, 1993; Paterson, Pryor, & Field, 1995; Rice & Cummings, 1996) and social competence (Adam, Sheldon-Keller, & West, 1996 Paterson, Pryor, & Field, 1995).

The attachment theory proposes that the degree of emotional security in the relationship between an infant and its mother heavily influences the child's competence in future social relationships (Bowlby, 1969:1982). In Bowlby's theory, attachment refers to the unique emotional bond between a care giver and an infant. The security of the attachment depends on the appropriateness and the sensitivity with which a caregiver satisfies his or her infant's demands. Adequate attachment relationships are beneficial because they provide a child with a secure "home base" from which he or she can further explore the external environment (Waters & Cummings, 2000).

The life-span view on development has extended the definition of attachment beyond childhood. Studies have reported that attachment to parents is an essential determinant in the adolescent's adjustment into the college years. Paterson, Pryor, and Field's (1995) study demonstrated that the quality of adolescents' attachment to their parents was significantly related to overall self-esteem, social competence, and coping ability. Laible et al. (2000) reported that parental secure attachment in adolescence was negatively associated with depression and aggression. On the contrary, college students with secure attachment to their parents represented higher psychological well-being, self-esteem, life satisfaction, social competence, and general college adjustment than students who had insecure attachment (Adam, Sheldon-Keller, & West, 1996; Allen, Moore, & Bell, 1998; Lapsley, Rice, & FitzGerald, 1990; Mattanah, Hancock, & Brand, 2004; Paterson, Pryor, & Field, 1995; Rosenstein & Horowitz, 1996 Vivona, 2000).

Although theorists have insisted on endurance of developed attachment state in infancy (Bowlby, 1978; Thompson, 1999), some of them have admitted the possibility of change in the attachment state. Bowlby (1978) disclosed that when a child develops an insecure attachment relationship with his or her caregiver, the insecurity could be changed to a secure attachment if a new caregiver who is more sensitive and responsible to meet the child's need becomes available. Main et al. (1985) stated that a new integration or reinterpretation of the attachment-related experiences could be the way to change an adult's attachment style. This viewpoint suggests the latent possibility of redirecting a person's insecure attachment, given an appropriate intervention or

process of reframing the negative experience in late adolescence.

Lin (1998) performed the forgiveness education program for insecurely attached college students in Taiwan. The results supported that the forgiveness intervention can make a difference in the degree of security in the attachment relationship with parents. Based on the existing studies, the present study will investigate the effects of forgiveness education in enhancing self-esteem and social competence which are related to attachment relationship in late adolescence.

I . Attachment to Parents in Late Adolescence

Adolescents' attachment relationships are in the stage of transition from children's attachment to adults' attachment: that is, the attachment relationship during adolescence has features of childhood attachment as well as adult attachment. According to Hazan and Shaver (1994), three differences can be found between the attachment in childhood and in adulthood: a) adult attachment relationships are typically reciprocal, with each partner being both a provider and a recipient of care, whereas childhood attachments are typically unilateral provider-receiver relationships; b) "whereas infants and young children may require physical contact with an attachment figure to feel completely secure, adolescents and adults are often able to derive comfort from the mere knowledge that their attachment figures can be contacted if needed" and c) "a child's primary attachment figure is usually a parent, whereas an adult's primary attachment figure is most commonly a peer,

usually a sexual partner" (pp. 16-17).

The attachment in adolescence has similar traits to that of the adult, in regards to the above three indicators, but important differences remain: adolescents still display a tendency to turn to parents in an extremely distressful situation (Steinberg, 1990), and often perceive parents to be important attachment figures even in late adolescence (Fraley & Davis, 1997). Hazan and Shaver (1994) concluded an important feature of attachment in late adolescence: an increasing role of attachment to peers and the stable function of parental attachment as a secure base. That is, parents are never completely relinquished as attachment figures (Hazan & Shaver, 1994). Allen and Land (1999) support Hazan and Shaver's idea on the role of parents in late adolescence saying that a central function may be to provide an emotional secure base from which adolescents can explore the wide range of emotional states that arise when they are learning to live as relatively autonomous adults. Attachment to parents in adolescence as a secure base has been supported by many empirical studies (Allen, Moore, Kuperminc, & Bell, 1998; Armsden & Greenberg, 1987; Laible, Carlo, & Raffaelli, 2000; Wilkinson, 2001).

Gender differences between adolescents and parents also seem to influence attachment and psychological functioning in late adolescence. According to Rice and Cummings (1996), adolescents' attachment to their mothers accounted for more variance in self-esteem than their attachment to their fathers. Kenney and Donaldson (1991) reported that college women described themselves as significantly more attached to their parents in comparison with college men. Kenney and Donaldson also

indicated a more significant relationship between attachment and social competence scores in college women compared to college men. Therefore, it could be concluded from both of these studies that female college students are more vulnerable to the influence of insecure parental attachment than college males and that their attachment to their mothers has more significant effects than their attachment to their fathers. Accordingly, this present study will focus on female college students' attachment to their mothers.

II. Forgiveness Education

Enright and the Human Development Study Group (1991) define forgiveness as a willingness to abandon one's right to resentment, negative judgment, and indifferent behavior toward one who unjustly injured us, while fostering the undeserved qualities of compassion, generosity, and even love toward him or her. Enright et al. (1992; 1996) emphasize that forgiveness is a moral response between persons and that a forgiver is not acting on the basis of obligation, but rather by free choice. Moreover, forgiveness transforms one's view of the offender, his or her own emotional state, and the relationship. To clarify the definition of forgiveness, forgiveness is differentiated from pardon, reconciliation, and condoning the offense (Enright et al., 1991). Pardon involves an authority superintending laws by which the degree of punishment is established for each violation. Reconciliation refers to a behavioral change between two individuals, whereas forgiveness is an internal release. Namely, when people reconcile, both parties must do

their part to re-establish the relationship. However, forgiveness is possible without the wrongdoer part. Forgiveness is not motivated exclusively by the desire to get rid of negative emotion. The forgiver also looks toward the other, hoping he or she changes through the forgiver's endeavor. Thus, forgiveness is a moral response, which is more than simply ceasing to be angry or accepting what happened.

Forgiveness education programs were developed based on the Enright Forgiveness Process Model, which consists of four phases: Uncovering, Decision, Work, and Deepening. Each phase has several units that represent the small steps which are important in the process of forgiving. Figure 1 describes the model.

In inspecting the existing studies on the forgiveness education, two types of forgiveness program are noticeable: group sessions and individual meetings. While the individual meetings yielded powerful results in the effectiveness of the education program (Baskin & Enright, 2004), the number of participants in the individual sessions was relatively limited. For example, Freedman and Enright (1996) had six participants for their experimental group, and Coyle and Enright (1997) had only five for the experimental group. In contrast to the individual meetings, many participants can be treated in group-sessions. However, a limitation of group sessions is that this forum may not offer an appropriate level of sensitivity for the individual needs of the participants. Therefore, a new method of teaching forgiveness that reflects individual conditions and accommodates a sufficient number of participants is needed now in order to better evaluate the efficacy of forgiveness education.

Uncovering Phase

- 1.Examination of psychological defenses and the issues involved
- 2.Confrontation of anger: the point is to release, not harbor in anger
- 3.Admittance of shame, when this is appropriate
- 4.Awareness of depleted emotional energy
- 5.Awareness of cognitive rehearsal of the offense
- 6.Insight that the injured party may be comparing self with the injurer
- 7.Realization that oneself may be permanently and adversely changed by the injury
- 8.Insight into a possibly altered "just world" view

Decision Phase

- 9.A change of heart/conversation/new insights that old resolution strategies are not working
- 10.Willingness to consider forgiveness as an option
- 11.Commitment to forgive the offender

Work Phase

- 12.Reframing, through role taking, who the wrongdoer is by viewing him or her in context
- 13.Empathy and compassion toward the offender
- 14.Bearing/accepting the pain
- 15.Giving a moral gift to the offender

Deepening Phase

- 16.Finding meaning for self and others in the suffering and in the forgiveness process
 - 17.Realization that self has needed others' forgiveness in the past
 - 18.Insight that one is not alone (universality, support)
 - 19.Realization that self may have a new purpose in life because of the injury
 - 20.Awareness of decreased negative affect and perhaps, increased positive affect, if this begins to emerge, toward the injurer; awareness of internal, emotional release
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Figure 1. Enright Forgiveness Process Model (cited in Enright & Ftzgibbons, 2000)

This new approach for teaching forgiveness combines a couple of successful tools from the field of counseling psychology: self-administration and individual contact

through E-mail. Recently more and more attention has been paid to the efficacy of 'self-help' or 'self-administered' interventions with minimal contact with therapists (Scogin, 1998). In addition, attempts have been made to explore alternative ways to contact clients, which can substitute the traditional face-to-face meeting. One of them is electronic mailing (Johnston, 1996; Oravec, 2000). These relatively novel methods could be useful in individualized education on forgiveness. Thus, the present study attempted to apply the self-administered program including E-mail correspondence to the forgiveness education.

III. Method

A. Participants

Twenty female college students in a university at a mid-size US city participated in this study (mean age = 20.4). These people identified themselves as daughters with insecure attachment to their mothers at the initial survey. All of them were Caucasian.

B. Instrument

Four questionnaires were used for pretest, posttest, and follow-up test. They measured the degree of secure attachment, self-esteem, social competence, and forgiveness.

1. Relationship Questionnaire (RQ)

The RQ developed by Bartholomew (1990) measures attachment to a significant person, who was a mother in this study. One out of four statements, which describes most accurately the relationship with her mother is chosen and rated on a 7-point-scale to show the extent of secure attachment (i.e., score ranges from 1 to 7). Scharfe and Bartholomew (1994) reported moderate reliability and validity. The reliability in the present study was .61 by an 8-week interval test-retest method.

2. Self-Esteem Inventory (SEI)

The Coopersmith's Self-Esteem Inventory was employed as a self-esteem measure. It was designed to assess "evaluative attitude toward the self in social, academic, family and personal area of experience"(Coopersmith, 1981). It consists of 25 self-reporting true/false items. Scores can range from 0 to 100, high scores representing high self-esteem. Bedeian et al. (1977) and Coopersmith (1981) reported reliability (.80-.92) and reasonable validity. The reliability (i.e. Cronbach's alpha) with the present participants was .86.

3. Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire (ICQ)

This 40-item questionnaire was developed by Buhrmester et al. (1988). Each item describes a common

interpersonal situation for which a 5-point rating scale is used to respond, which represents the level of competence and comfort in handling this situation. The total score acquired through its average score ranges from 0 to 4. Reasonable reliability (.80) and validity were reported (Buhrmeste et al., 1988). The reliability in the present study was .94.

4. Enright Forgiveness Inventory (EFI)

This 60-item inventory is based on the Enright forgiveness process model (Enright et al., 1992). It requires focusing on a particular experience of someone hurting them and responding to each statement on a 6-point-scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The total scores of the EFI range from 60 to 360, with a high score representing high forgiveness. Studies have confirmed the EFI's reliability and validity (Ashleman, 1996; Subkoviak et al., 1995). The reliability in this study was .98.

C. Procedure

A screening process using the four questionnaires was conducted to determine if a participant identified herself as a daughter with insecure attachment to mother and had low scores in the other three inventories. Particularly, they should have emotional injuries hurt by their mothers, which they forgive their mothers about. Through this process, 20 females (10 for the experimental group and 10 for the control group) were selected out of more than 500. The test results of the screening were

used as the pretest scores.

The forgiveness program for the experimental group continued for eight weeks. The focused book was *Forgiveness Is a Choice* which was written by Dr. R. Enright and published by the American Psychology Association (APA) in 2001. It consists of three parts (i.e. Introduction, The process of forgiveness, and Going deeper) that have 15 chapters. During the eight weeks, participants were to read the assigned chapter(s) of the book and write journals guided by the week's reading. The themes for the journal entries were provided in the book. For example, after reading chapter 7, the readers meet the question for the journal entry like "Take some time to reflect on refraining from subtle revenge in your journal. What do you think of this idea? Are you willing to change in this way? You might want to structure this written exercise as a kind of debate. State a good reason for going ahead with forgiveness, and then answer it with any doubt or concern you may have...." In addition, the researcher sent the participants E-mails weekly to check on how their reading and writing were going and if they had any comments or questions. A previous study with college students suggested that eight weeks are appropriate for the forgiveness education (Al-Mabuk, Enright, & Cardis, 1995).

The other group (i.e., the control group) did not receive any treatment and was not contacted during the eight weeks. After the eight weeks, the participants completed the four questionnaires for their posttest. Again, two months later, there was a follow-up test using the same instruments.

IV. Results

To see the change of score from pretest to posttest and from pretest to follow-up test, each variable’s mean score and standard deviation at each time were reported at Table 1. According to the table, the experimental group’s scores on all four inventories increased, while the control group’s scores did not show any increase except forgiveness score. The control group’s social competence score actually decreased.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of each Variable

	Experimental Group			Control Group		
	Pretest	Posttest	follow-up	Pretest	Posttest	Follow-up
Secure Attachment	2.4 (1.35)	4.3 (1.66)	4.7 (1.45)	2.9 (1.37)	3.2 (1.27)	2.9 (1.10)
Self-Esteem	56.4 (22.66)	70.4 (21.45)	71.6 (15.6)	60.0 (24.07)	60.0 (26.33)	59.2 (22.77)
Social Competence	3.23 (.48)	3.54 (.42)	3.52 (.70)	3.57 (.43)	3.36 (.53)	3.46 (.39)
Forgiveness	236.7 (50.76)	287.2 (47.74)	287.9 (49.52)	255.7 (41.99)	263.9 (30.38)	269.0 (20.70)

To test how much each group’s score improved, a paired samples one-tailed t test was performed with the gain scores. The "gain scores" means the difference between mean scores obtained of the two different tests. Thus, individuals in each group can have a pair of gain scores from two subtractions: a) gain scores between the pretest and the posttest, and b) gain scores between the pretest and the follow-up test. According to the t-test results, all the gain scores on the four variables in the experimental group significantly increased, but most of the gain scores of the control group did not changed (Table 2).

Table 2. Comparison of the gained means based on the T-test

	Experimental Group		Control Group	
	Posttest vs. Pretest	Follow-up vs. Pretest	Posttest vs. Pretest	Follow-up vs. Pretest
Secure Attachment	1.9* (1.51)	2.3** (1.42)	.3 (.82)	.0 (.82)
Self-Esteem	14.4* (16.67)	15.2* (14.70)	0 (7.06)	-.8 (15.75)
Social Competence	.31** (.30)	.29 (.52)	-.21* (.28)	-.11 (.36)
Forgiveness	50.5** (46.99)	51.2* (43.04) *	8.2 (38.72)	13.3 (33.58)

() : S.D. * p<.05 ** p<.01

On the secure attachment test, the experimental group showed significant gain scores in the posttest (mean =1.9, t =2.31, p<.05) and in the follow-up test (mean = 2.3, t=3.77, p<.01), whereas the control group did not have any significant gain (mean=.3 and 0 at each occasion).

Regarding the gain scores on the self-esteem test, the experimental group had significant changes in both comparisons: 14.4 between pretest and posttest ($t = 2.08$, $p < .05$) and 15.2 between pretest and follow-up test ($t = 3.27$, $p < .05$). However, the control group did not show any significant difference.

The gain score on the social competence in the experimental group increased with the magnificent of .31 ($t = 2.98$, $p < .01$) between pretest and posttest, but did not show significant change from the pretest to the follow-up ($m = .29$, $t = 1.73$, $p > .05$). That is, a wash-off effect was found with social competence variable. The control group showed significant reduction on the social competence score on the posttest ($m = -.21$, $t = -2.33$, $p < .05$) and also somewhat decreased on the follow-up ($m = -.11$, $t = -1.01$, $p > .05$).

Finally, forgiveness scores on the EFI showed significant change only with the experimental group. The gain score between pretest and posttest was 50.5 ($t = 3.40$, $p < .01$) and that between pretest and follow-up test was 51.2 ($t = 3.76$, $p < .01$). On the other hand, the control group did not show any significant changed scores.

V. Discussion

This study intended to improve late adolescents' self-esteem and social competence by increasing secure attachment to their mothers through the Enright forgiveness program. The ten people who had participated in the self-administered forgiveness showed enhanced self-esteem and social competence as well as secure

attachment. That is, this forgiveness program made difference on secure attachment scores between the experimental group and the control group. In other words, improved secure attachment state and willingness to forgive brought the positive change in self-esteem and interpersonal competence.

The results of the present study, however, are limited to only female college students with insecure attachment to their mothers. Using attachment only to mothers could be justified by Bowlby (1969:1982)'s original idea on attachment established between a mother-infant dyad. That is, Bowlby's unique attachment was related only to a primary caregiver (mainly mother). The degree of security in this original attachment could impact on the child's self and social development even in late adolescence (Waters & Cummings, 2000). In addition, according to Al-Mabuk et al. (1995), compared the effects of forgiveness education in terms of changed attitude toward father or mother, the amount of change in attitude toward mother was larger than toward father. The correlation coefficient between the forgiveness score and attitude toward father was significantly negative, whereas the correlation with the attitude toward mother was significantly positive. This means that the degree of forgiveness is positively associated only with the attitude toward the mother, not with the attitude toward the father. On the other hand, relationships between attachment and self-esteem or social competence were confirmed more strongly with female groups than with male groups (Rice & Cummings, 1996; Kenny & Donaldson, 1991). Thus, these studies support that the selected gender group (i.e., female) and the members' attached object (i.e., mother) contribute to the relatively

salient results in this research.

It is hard to find studies on changing the state of insecure attachment. Attachment theorists including Bowlby (1978) have believed that insecure attachment originated from infancy would not shift to secure attachment even though they admitted a little piece of possibility (see p.2-3 this paper). However, the idea of Main et al. (1985) shows the mechanism of shift to secure attachment and explains the association between the increased forgiveness scores and the security in attachment. That is, the participants' internal representation seems to be changed through the forgiveness process which lets them confront their inner anger, acknowledge their unstable emotion toward their mothers, compare their own state with the mother's condition, view their mothers through role-taking, understand their mothers' past experiences, and finally forgive their mothers with positive affect. This process positively influenced the participants' negative "mental representation" of the mothers and caused their secure attachment scores to increase. In other words, the other ten participants who were in the control group did not have an opportunity to shift their existing representation into a new "working model" in Bowlby's term. This result implies that even though an individual has insecure attachment to her mother, developed through years of hurtful and unfair treatment, she can move toward secure attachment even in late adolescence as long as she willingly implements forgiveness. The present study is one of the rare attempts to alter the attachment organization to secure state, and has significance in its endeavor to connect forgiveness education with improving insecure attachment.

Another significance of this study should be discussed in terms of an effort to find a new method to teach forgiveness and its success related to socio-psychological well-being. Traditional methods for teaching forgiveness are "group discussions" and "individual counseling". Group discussions for forgiveness usually involve eight to twenty sessions each consisting of lecture, group discussion, and group activities. Participants have an opportunity to share their painful experiences with others who have similar wounds, as well as an opportunity to exchange their thoughts about forgiveness. This style could be especially helpful for those who need an emotional support group and effective in understanding and accepting forgiveness as a choice through exchanging ideas with others. However, in most cases, victims of unfairness hesitate to reveal their hurt to others. In the present study, many participants did not want to share their abnormal relationship with their mothers because they thought it might be too embarrassing to talk about their personal problems. On the contrary, individual meetings or individual counseling are the other method of forgiveness intervention. For an amount of time, a participant and a counselor meet regularly and talk about an issue using the forgiveness model. This seems to be a good way to meet the participant's personal needs privately and sensitively, thus producing very effective outcomes in forgiving wrongdoers. Unfortunately, this method is usually reserved for a very small population due to its time consumption and need for professional counselors. The method used in this study to teach forgiveness is neither group discussions nor individual counseling. Instead, the participants in this study were to perform

self-administered education. They read each chapter of the assigned book, wrote in journals according to the guides accompanying the reading, and expressed their feelings and problems to the researcher via E-mail. This new approach could contribute to expanding the application of forgiveness education complementing the deficits of the two traditional methods.

The increased social competence score did not remain at the two-month follow-up test even though it showed significant change between the pretest and the posttest. The effect was worn out at the follow-up. Nonetheless, this result showed that the forgiveness education was effective for increasing low social competence associated with to insecure attachment at least during the treatment. Thus, it implies that the extended duration of the forgiveness program could make difference in long-term effect for social competence.

The data of the present study were collected in the US. Hence, it should be acknowledged that there could be limitations in adapting all the results of this study to current Korean adolescents' psychological and social development. Nevertheless, we should admit that studies on improving the state of insecure attachment are needed for our adolescents' secure development in psychological functioning such as self-esteem and social competence. Adopting and testing the forgiveness education in Korea should be the theme for the next step.

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